Two Thumbs Up!:
A Student Video Production

By Elizabeth Gareis

When we hear the word technology, most of us think of computers and of students using software programs, the Internet, and e-mail for language learning. We sometimes forget that technology encompasses many other media that can be equally educational and stimulating, including video technology, which is often underused in language classrooms. Many teachers show videos to their classes, but most do not use the technology behind the finished product, such as cameras and editing devices, to its full advantage. Yet student video productions using these devices can be the perfect vehicle for integrating skills practice, authentic communication, and process-oriented group activities at a level of student involvement that is difficult to sustain through other media. Students find video work exhilarating and enjoy watching their own productions for pleasure and for analysis of their language skills.

Context

There are many contexts in which video projects can be carried out. Producing videos is suitable for young adults and adults in secondary, higher, or adult education as well as in intensive English programs. Video projects can be freestanding or connected with other subject matter included in the course.

The project described in this case study was carried out in an intensive English program. Most students enrolled in this program are in their early 20s and want to pursue college degrees in the United States, or are enrolled only to learn English. The students have a wide variety of needs and abilities. Some possess good oral communication skills, but lack fluency and accuracy in written expression. Others excel in grammar, passive listening, and reading comprehension, but need training in speaking and writing. Still others (especially candidates for the Test of English as a Foreign Language) are concerned about vocabulary development, structural knowledge, and academic listening and reading skills. To provide choices for this diverse student population, different courses were created that address student needs and interests in various ways.

One of these courses is centered around reading longer works of literature and viewing and analyzing their film adaptations. The course is designed to appeal to students interested in artistic expression and cultures other than their own. It targets all four skills through a smorgasbord of listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities.

Teaching English Through Literature and Film Adaptations

Students often ask to read novels or plays and watch movies as part of their classes. Since many novels and plays have been made into movies (e.g., The Color Purple, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof), the two media are easily combined. In tandem they lend themselves to an enormous variety of language and culture learning activities (Gareis, Allard, Gill, and Saindon 1997; 1998; 1998a).

Care should be taken, of course, to select material that is appropriate for the students and the setting. Teachers should preread and preview all potential choices to eliminate works unsuitable in language or content (Gareis 1997).

Before the students start reading the novel or play in my class, we conduct a free association activity. For this exercise, I select a visual such as a poster, magazine picture, photo, or drawing that is related to the theme of the selected work of literature. Students sit in a circle and share what they think or feel when they see the picture. For example, when we recently read the novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, I showed an illustration of native Americans salmon fishing in the United States Northwest before the advent of European settlers. (This picture was in reference to one of the characters in the novel who is native American.) The students' free associations included environmental concerns, stereotypes of native Americans that persist in the students' home countries, and memories of recent fishing excursions.

Two or three weeks are set aside for reading the novel. Students complete 10- to 15- page reading assignments at home, after which we spend one or more class sessions working with the content of the passages. At the beginning of the first class session after an assignment, I administer a short true-or-false comprehension quiz. This quiz encourages students to come prepared and allows us to clarify the basic premise of the reading assignment when we discuss the answers to the questions after the quiz.

During this post quiz discussion of the reading assignment, questions are initiated by the students or the teacher. The discussion works best if a variety of topics is addressed: plot development, character profiles, cultural issues, literary themes, personal reactions. When we discussed the day's segment from One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, we compared mental health institutions across countries, analyzed metaphors contained in the passage, and learned about individual students' personal experiences with hospitals in general.

Vocabulary development is another integral part of class work following a reading assignment. We vary activities: vocabulary journal discussions, vocabulary card games, and group activities focused on vocabulary development. Students keep vocabulary journals of unfamiliar words they find interesting or important. They share the journals in small group sessions, determining which words they want to use for the vocabulary games and which for some of the vocabulary development group activities.

The vocabulary games are played with card pairs featuring a picture prompt and a matching sentence card. The students prepare the cards after a vocabulary journal discussion. On the picture prompt, a vocabulary word from the reading passage is written and illustrated. The matching sentence card shows a sentence containing a synonym for that word. Any number of games can be played with the cards, including matching games such as Concentration. One game requires each student to express the meaning of the word depicted on his or her picture card through paraphrases, synonyms, or antonyms while other students try to guess the word.

In addition to the vocabulary card games, a number of group activities serve as catalysts for vocabulary development. For instance, students can use words from their journals to create group

poems, search the reading passage for words describing a certain character or object, or translate slang expressions into more formal English.

We also conduct other group activities that are not vocabulary oriented but instead focus on content. Working in small groups as a homework assignment, students create plot summaries and character sketches, conduct role-playing based on situations from the text, or design surveys to be administered to native speakers.

Finally, each reading passage is accompanied by a writing task. Students write journal entries on issues of interest, essays on controversial themes, speeches that a character from the novel might have delivered, fictitious letters from one character to another, news-paper articles about occurrences in the book, descriptions of settings in the book, and a variety of other papers related to the content of the passage.

After the novel is read and before we watch the movie version, we conduct the video project, which is described in detail below. When the video project is finished, we turn to the movie adaptation of the novel. Previewing activities for the film adaptation include questions about a possibly different ending for the movie; predictions on how literary techniques, such as first-person narration or inner monologues, might have been translated into film; and discussions about choices of actors, set design, music, and other elements of filmmaking. During the viewing of the movie, we take time out for language learning activities, such as guessing dialogues (with the sound turned off), completing scenes (with the video stopped at suitable intervals), lip synching (after a scene has been watched several times), and fill-in-the-blank exercises (prepared beforehand by the teacher) (Lonergan 1984; Stempleski and Arcario 1992; Stempleski and Tomalin 1990). Students also keep track of the differences between the book and the movie, which we later chart and discuss.

After viewing the film, we compare the book and movie, write film reviews, enact a movie critics' debate, or interpret the work from a variety of film theoretical perspectives, such as psychoanalytic, Marxist, and feminist (Bywater and Sobchack 1989). Students research any of these theories and other themes related to the movie (e.g., the director, the actors). They then give presentations or write essays on their views and findings.

The Video Project

Novels and plays are read in many ESL/EFL programs, and movies have been a favorite part of teaching language for several years. The two media can be used separately, or together when literature and film adaptations are the focus of a course. When literature and film are used together, time can be set aside to explore the connections and differences between the two media. A novel or play and its movie adaptation, for example, can provide the context for a student video production. In such a case, students use technology and work as a team to create their own video version of a scene from the novel or play. The activity is done after the students have read the book and before they watch the movie. Depending on the degree of elaboration, the project can be completed in one session, a week, or longer.

The equipment used can be as basic or as complex as resources allow. The only essential items are a video camera, a TV monitor, and a videocassette recorder (VCR). If scenes are well rehearsed, they can be filmed in sequence, thus adding spontaneity and potentially humorous outcomes while eliminating the time-consuming and often complicated editing process. Naturally, a superior final product will be obtained by using more sophisticated production technology. Thus, external microphones and lights can add tremendously to the video's quality, and editings and sound-mixing equipment will allow for greater flexibility and creativity during the shooting and postproduction stages of the project.

Video production provides several benefits to students. Even if basic equipment is used, student video productions are not only fun and exciting, they provide a range of opportunities for language learning. Thus, students practice all language skills and apply authentic language use to a variety of team-oriented, problem-solving tasks. Many of the activities involved in video production allow for the tactile, practical, and kinesthetic learning styles often neglected in other classroom activities. Video production also allows students to choose roles—crew or cast—according to their interests and talents. Crew members enjoy the hands-on experience and interaction within the team. And students with acting roles can try out personal and cultural identities different from their own, thereby possibly overcoming inhibitions and shyness in speaking the foreign language. Finally, the finished product can be shown repeatedly for enjoyment as well as linguistic self-reflection.

Preproduction

To prepare for the video production proj-ect, students select a passage from the novel or play that appeals to them and that they hope the director will have included in the film version. They then work on this passage with the goal of videotaping it. The project can be very elaborate and include makeup, costumes, and props, or it can be filmed as a sketch with a focus on only the basics of video production. In either case, students learn many of the techniques used by major film companies in producing movies and have a chance to view the film at the end.

After selecting a passage from the novel or play, the class meets to discuss the tasks and roles to be carried out. Each student (and the teacher) selects one or more roles and familiarizes himself or herself with the tasks involved. If the class is small, production members can have multiple roles; in large classes, roles can be shared by groups, or two separate projects can be carried out for different passages of the novel. Video projects are divided into preproduction, production, and postproduction phrases, which take place consecutively. So students with multiple roles need to divide their tasks accordingly and select roles from the different stages so that they remain occupied throughout the project.

Before students get into groups to complete their individual preproduction tasks, the director calls a meeting to discuss the specifics of each task. This meeting is necessary so that everyone understands how the parts that each student contributes (e.g., story- board, props, set) fit into the master plan. After each task is clarified, students separate to pursue their roles either individually or in groups. These activities can be done during class time or as a homework assignment.

Sample Screenplay: "A Wedding That Almost Wasn't"

Cast:
Bob, the bridegroom
Alfred, the best man
Susie, the bride
Julia, Susie's mother
Ben, Susie's father
wedding guests

(Outside a church on a beautiful day in June. The guests for Bob and Susie's wedding are assembled, but the bride is late. The groom is getting worried.)

Bob: (looking worried) I wonder what's wrong…

Alfred: Don't worry, Bob. Susie'll be here. They probably got stuck in traffic. (In her bathroom. Susie is standing in front of the mirror, applying makeup. Her mother is calling from the other room.)

Julia: Come on, Susie. We're already half an hour late. Your father is waiting downstairs. He is probably getting nervous.

(In front of the house. Susie's father is waiting next to the car. He is yawning. In front of the church, Bob looks agitated.)

Bob: (looking frustrated) That's it. I'm leaving. And to think I trusted her…

(Bob takes off his carnation, throws it to the ground, and leaves.)

Susie:
(running after Bob)
Bob! Darling! Wait! Wait!

(Bob turns around, happy to see her; they hug.)

Susie:
(hugging Bob)
I love you.

Sample Shooting Script: "A Wedding That Almost Wasn't"

Cast: (in order of appearance)
wedding guests
flower girls
bridesmaids
Bob, the bridegroom

Alfred, the best man
Susie, the bride
Julia, Susie's mother
Ben, Susie's father
preacher

1. EXTREME LONG SHOT: Outside a church on a beautiful day in the summer. The guests for Bob and Susie's wedding are assembled. Many cars are parked in front of the church.

2. LONG SHOT: Two flower girls are playing marbles. Other wedding guests are standing in groups, talking.

3. FULL SHOT: Three bridesmaids are standing together, looking impatient. The one in the middle is looking at her watch.

4. MEDIUM, OVER-THE-SHOULDER SHOT: Bob, the bridegroom, and Alfred, the best man, are standing in front of the church. Bob looks worried.

BOB:
I wonder what's wrong…

ALFRED:
Don't worry, Bob. Susie'll be here. They probably got stuck in traffic.

5. MEDIUM SHOT: In Susie's bathroom. Susie is standing in front of the mirror, applying makeup.

JULIA:
(voice-over)
Come on, Susie. We're already half an hour late. Your father is waiting downstairs. He is probably getting nervous.

6. LONG SHOT: In front of the house. Susie's father is waiting next to the car. He is yawning.

7. MEDIUM SHOT: Back in front of the church. Bob looks agitated, frustrated.

BOB:
That's it. I'm leaving. And to think I trusted her…
(He takes off his carnation, throws it to the ground, and leaves.)

8. CLOSE-UP: The carnation is lying on the ground, and Bob's feet are seen as he walks away.

9. LONG SHOT: Bob exits the frame. The carnation is lying on the ground in the middle of the frame.

10. Camera PANS to show Susie running around the corner trying to catch up with Bob.

SUSIE:
Bob! Darling! Wait! Wait!

11. CLOSE-UP, REACTION SHOT: Bob turns around, his face showing relief and happiness.

12. MEDIUM SHOT: Bob and Susie hug each other.
SUSIE:
I love you.

13. CLOSE-UP: Bob and Susie kiss. Wedding music starts playing. The camera ZOOMS OUT, and we see that the background has changed. The couple is now in the church in front of the altar.

Production

After the storyboard, screenplay, and shooting script have been finalized and studied by crew and cast, plans are made for the production. The necessary equipment is secured, materials for props and costumes obtained, and the set prepared for action. Most importantly, the director and cast start rehearsing.

Rehearsals

Once the actors are ready for rehearsal, they warm up for the performance. To do so, drama techniques used by drama students and professional actors are helpful (Wessels 1987). Even though crew members will not perform in front of the camera, they can participate in the warm-up activities, which are designed to help people relax, stay focused, and develop a team spirit.

One effective way to warm up and become comfortable working with fellow actors and crew members is by playing drama games. During the game Mirrors, for example, one player copies everything his or her partner does. Movements can be abstract and dance-like or simple actions such as brushing one's teeth. In the game Mime, one player mimes a feeling (e.g., love, hate, happiness, grief), and the class tries to guess the emotion. During the game Gossip, a complex sentence is passed from student to student by whispering. The last person then says out loud what he or she has heard, and the sentence is compared with its original version, which is usually quite different.

In addition to drama games, rehearsals should be preceded by physical as well as vocal warm-ups. Physical warm-ups could start with stretching, hopping, jogging in place, and shaking out your arms and legs. They could then progress to deep breathing, face-loosening exercises (e.g., opening eyes and mouth vs. tightening the whole face, and pre-articulatory activities such as silent lip reading of simple words and phrases in pairs).

Vocal warm-ups can begin with an exercise that combines sounds with conscious breathing (e.g., slowly exhaling on a long \a\ or \m\, first on an even pitch level, then on a rising or falling pitch). Group chanting of tongue twisters and poems is also fun and prepares students to focus on pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation. Students might also find it helpful to practice upcoming dialogues as choral readings between groups of students instead of pairs. Students can bring in their favorite poems for the class to chant together or try one or more of the following tongue twisters (Rosenbloom 1986; Wessels 1987).

• Can an active actor always actually act accurately?

• Blake the baker bakes black bread.

• “Cheep-cheep,” chirped the cheery chick.

• Flee from fog to fight flu fast.

• Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

• She sells seashells by the seashore.

• A tutor who tooted a flute tried to tutor two tooters to toot. Said the two to the tutor, “Is it harder to toot or to tutor two tooters to toot?

• Round and round the rugged rocks the ragged rascal ran.

• Six thick thistles stuck together.

• The tip of the tongue, the teeth, and the lips.

• How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?

• Whether the weather be fine or whether the weather be not; whether the weather be cold or whether the weather be hot; we’ll weather the weather whatever the weather, whether we like it or not.

Finally, here is some guidance for stepping into an acting role during rehearsals and during the videotaping. Each actor can imagine how his or her character will walk and talk and which gestures and facial expressions he or she will use. It may be helpful to mime physical activities from the upcoming scene (e.g., building a wall) or to improvise certain speech acts without the use of the script (e.g., how an introduction or apology might take place).

When the rehearsal begins, the director provides leadership. Although cast and crew can provide input, operations will be smoother and less time-consuming if the director has clear ideas about how a scene should be acted and filmed. The role of the director is very complex. I often take on the function of assistant to the student director to aid with the task.

Taping

For everybody to get used to the videotaping process and to allow for problem solving and self-reflection, it is helpful to videotape some of the rehearsals and then view them. These preliminary viewings can be used to constructively critique task performance and eliminate problems before the final taping. Finally, the director determines the call-time for the first day of shooting, and everyone assembles for the main part of the project.

Everybody in the cast and crew works to shoot as perfect a video as possible. If editing equipment is available, scenes may be shot out of sequence. Several takes of each scene can be collected so that the best take can be selected later. If no editing equipment is available, the video has to be shot in sequence, so cast and crew should rehearse each scene several times before shooting it. The title of the production should be written on a blackboard or poster and filmed prior to shooting. Similarly, credits can be added after the video is completed.

If the shooting extends over several class sessions, dailies (the day's recordings) can be watched at the end of each session for pleasure and analysis. During this viewing, preliminary decisions can be made as to which takes will be most suitable for the final cut.

Postproduction

After the final wrap, the director and editor(s) work together to complete the video. With my classes, I use a simple, linear editing machine that is available in the media department of our university. This editing machine has a timing device and jog shuttle that allows us to cut and insert segments with precision and ease. We also use a titler to create credits on computer and later copy them onto the video. Linear editing machines and titlers represent the middle ground in editing technology. There are simpler and also more sophisticated alternatives.

If no editing machines are available, a more basic setup is to connect the video camera to a VCR or to connect two VCRs so that the original takes can be played on one machine and the final product recorded on the other. Some VCRs have audio-in capabilities that make it possible to add sound effects and music. Titles and credits (taped from a blackboard or poster) should be inserted at the beginning and end of the movie. Although this makeshift editing process results in a second-generation videotape with a certain loss in visual quality, it allows for editing, a process that requires students to use their language skills.

On the other side of the editing spectrum is editing software, such as AVID, Media 100, or Premiere, which edits videos in a professional manner and does not diminish the quality. Classes may have one or two students who are familiar with some of this software or are interested in learning to use it. If so, it may be worthwhile to edit the video using this technology. The software has capabilities for adding titles, credits, sound effects, and music and is designed for high-quality productions.

Screening

When the video is complete, it is time to celebrate. My students have enjoyed staging opening night ceremonies, complete with invited guests, refreshments, and achievement awards for actors and crew. Students create a poster for the performance, make plans for opening night, and act as announcers during the award ceremony. Students also serve as judges. Each student in the class receives an award. Categories include not only "best actor" and "best actress," but also "most organized," "most technically talented," "most laid-back," and so forth.

Alternatives

If shooting a scene for a novel or play is not feasible, students can conduct a similar project in a more suitable context. A shorter piece of literature, such as a short story, can be the focus. Students can also create a video without a literary foundation. They can record their own music

videos, commercials, or public service announcements, or produce short movies, soap operas, news programs, or documentaries. Other options are video journals in which students focus on themselves and their classmates, or promotional videos in which they record and describe attractive features of their school and town. The possibilities are endless.

Teachers who are not versed in video technology can consult with colleagues or their students to determine whether producing a video is possible. In most cases, basic video equipment is easy to handle, and most classes have at least a few students sufficiently proficient in video technology to act as tutors.

Although a student video production has many benefits, it is not free of potential pitfalls. Foremost among these are pitfalls related to the quality of the production process (Rose 1996; Stempleski and Arcario 1992).

Teachers should consider the following tips for a successful production process:

1. A relatively good rapport among members of the group, responsible attitudes, and good attendance are important for success.

2. At times, inappropriate topics or language may be selected by the students. Teachers should be prepared to discuss such issues, keeping in mind the possible audience and the sensitivities of the institution and individual students.

3. Equipment should be in good working condition and available when needed.

4. Either the teacher or some of the students should be sufficiently experienced in the use of the chosen equipment to avoid frustrations and make the project a rewarding experience for all.

5. During rehearsal and shooting, logistics are crucial, including providing copies of the script to all actors and crew members or arranging for props and costumes.

6. At the end of each shooting day or after the entire shoot, a backup or safety copy should be made of everything that was videotaped. This safety copy can replace the original in case of accidental damage. (The generational loss that commonly occurs when copying videotapes can be minimized if the copy is made on professional, high-quality, one-inch videotape and state-of-the-art equipment.)

7. If the project is lengthy and not shot in sequence, a list of scenes and takes helps keep track of the process and facilitates editing. The inventory should be kept on a chart called a tape log or cue sheet. It should list scenes, takes, content information, counter number and/or time for beginning and ending of scenes, remarks, and decisions on which takes are to be selected.

8. Last but not least, enough time should be set aside for all stages of the project, especially rehearsal and shooting. Requirements are often underestimated, leading to pressure and less-than-satisfactory results.

Conclusion

The tasks necessary for accomplishing the video project, whether done by a group or by individual students, are a vital part of the team effort and thus need to be well coordinated. Following is a list of these preproduction to postproduction procedures:

1. Select a theme such as a striking passage from a novel or play.

2. Select roles for cast and crew.

3. Draw a storyboard and write a screenplay and shooting script.

4. Use warm-up exercises for acting and team work.

5. Start rehearsing.

6. Arrange for props, the set, and possibly makeup, costumes, music, and special effects.

7. Videotape several takes of each scene.

8. Edit the video.

9. Create and exhibit a poster advertising the video screening.

10. Invite guests to the video premiere.

11. Have a party.

12. Watch the video together.

13. Give awards to cast and crew members.

A student video production can be a very simple one that can be completed in one class session, or it can be more elaborate requiring a week or longer to complete. No matter how much time is set aside for the project, going through the steps of creating a video is sure to involve every student and help develop language acquisition in all skill areas.

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